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The Representation of an Action: Tragedy between Kant and Hegel

Andrew Cooper – andrew.j.cooper@durham.ac.uk

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Abstract: Hegel's theory of tragedy has polarized critics. In the past, many philosophers have claimed that Hegel's theory of tragedy removes Kant's critical insights and returns to pre-critical metaphysics. More recently, several have argued that Hegel does not break faith with tragic experience but allows philosophy to be transformed by tragedy. In this paper I examine the strength of this revised position. First I show that it identifies Hegel's insightful critique of Kant's theoretical assumptions. Yet I then argue that it fails to note the practical importance of Kant's separation of knowledge and aesthetics. I propose an alternative approach to tragedy that builds from the revised view and yet maintains the autonomy of aesthetics. Tragedy represents an *action*, a set of events that are internally unified and yet cannot be reduced to theory. This is to say that tragedy confronts us with an aesthetic sphere of making and doing that, while constrained, is incessantly open and free.

‘Tragedy is the representation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself.’

Aristotle, *Poetics*¹

In his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel famously claims that the denouement of tragedy lies in our discovery that the finality of the action does not lie in the hero's suffering but rather in ‘the satisfaction of spirit’:

The true development of the action consists solely in the cancellation of conflicts *as conflicts*, in the reconciliation of the powers animating action which struggled to destroy one another in their mutual conflict. Only in that case does finality lie not in misfortune and suffering but in the satisfaction of the spirit, because only with such a conclusion can the necessity of what happens to

the individuals appear as absolute rationality, and only then can our hearts be morally at peace: shattered by the fate of the heroes but reconciled fundamentally. Only by adherence to this view can Greek tragedy be understood.²

The striking feature of Hegel's theory of tragedy is that it consists of an experience that is both aesthetic and rational. While Baumgarten and Kant made significant inroads to granting aesthetics the status of a science, it remained an inferior counterpart to cognition. At best aesthetic experience bears an analogical relation to our cognitive efforts. In contrast, Hegel argues that the action of Greek tragedy reveals a causality in experience that enlivens us to the development of absolute rationality, thereby satisfying reason's speculative desire for unified cognition.

Since Hegel first proposed his theory of tragedy, many philosophers have argued that it removes the critical insights of Kant's philosophical revolution and returns to pre-critical, dogmatic metaphysics (Schopenhauer 1969, Nietzsche 1967, Bradley 1962, Benjamin 1998, Adorno 2004, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1988, Taminiaux 1995, Nussbaum 2001, and Gardner 2002). In this view—I will call it the 'Kantian's view', for its proponents are more inspired by Kant and early Romanticism than by Hegel—Hegel's theory of tragedy replaces the contingency of Kant's aesthetic sphere with a trajectory that cannot do other but progress toward greater rationality. It is thus *anti-tragic*; true tragedy interrupts all claims to rational progression.

In his hugely influential Habilitationsschrift *An Essay on the Tragic*, Peter Szondi (1961) advanced an alternative view, claiming that in Hegel's philosophy 'the tragic and the dialectic coincide'. While the philosophical tradition beginning with Plato has constantly suppressed the tragic by holding the impassable absolute apart from the fragile world of change and decay, Szondi insists that Hegel opens a 'philosophy of tragedy' by placing nature and reason in the one sphere of being. Skating over Hegel's immense corpus, Szondi claims that the dialectic and the tragic coincide in the entanglement of Judaism and Christianity in 'The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate' (1798-1800), the conflict of ethics in *Natural Law* (1802-3), the inner movement of Spirit in *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), and the development of ethical life toward modernity in *Lectures on Aesthetics* (1818). Hegel shows us that tragedy, like the dialectic, is not a singular experience that ruptures systematic thought but rather a process; true tragedy *consists of* the cancellation of conflicts as conflicts.

By linking tragedy and the dialectic, Szondi's interpretation has brought a wave of scholarly attention to the central role of tragedy in Hegel's philosophy. While the tragedy of ancient Greece for Hegel provides the background against which modernity rises victorious, the coincidence of tragedy and the dialectic shows precisely that modernity, and hence philosophy, is tragic. Rather than overlooking sorrow and pain, Hegel shows us that the way of healing cannot be separated from that which needs healing. Modernity and philosophy are tragic to the extent that they contain tragedy within themselves.

As Lore Hühn (2011, 20) notes, Szondi does not provide an argument for the compatibility of tragedy and dialectic but rather a 'compilation of relevant texts' in which Hegel's analysis of tragedy takes a dialectical shape. Recognising the need for further work, several philosophers have attempted to defend Szondi's claim by reconstructing Hegel's project with particular attention to Hegel's sensitivity to tragic suffering and the immanent path of spirit (Dudley 2002, Houlgate 2004, George 2006, Peters 2009, Thibodeau 2011, Stern 2012, and Williams 2012). Against the Kantian's view, they propose that Hegel does not break with tragic experience but rather allows philosophy to be transformed by tragedy. Proponents of this view—I will call this the 'metaphysical realist's view', for it suggests that Hegel restores content to Kant's limitation of metaphysics to thought—argue that Hegel does not depart from the critical program but rather corrects it. By revealing Kant's inability to break from traditional philosophy Hegel is able to outline a properly 'tragic' philosophy, one that is unencumbered by external constraints.

In this paper I examine the strength of this revised position. Through focusing on the debate between the Kantian's and the metaphysical realist's views, I show that Hegel's theory of tragedy aims to solve three separate problems, each of which concerns Kant's critical philosophy: (1) the relation of reason to experience; (2) the reality of ethical conflicts and reason's power to overcome them; and (3) the autonomy of the aesthetic. Recognising these problems not only sharpens our awareness of the centrality of tragedy to Hegel's philosophy; it also shows that its 'tragic' status turns on how one conceives of the correct philosophical response to the problems opened by Kant's critical project.

I begin by contextualizing Hegel's theory of tragedy in the context of eighteenth century aesthetics. Baumgarten's original proposal for a new project of aesthetics turns on the recognition that philosophy's ongoing attempt to subordinate experience to reason comes at an unacceptable cost. Building on this project, Kant and Hegel saw that philosophy's understanding of reason requires

massive reconstruction. In the process of rebuilding, both philosophers turn to aesthetic items that problematize the strict boundary between reason and experience: artworks and organisms. While Kant proposes to free aesthetic items from reason, thereby granting aesthetic experience a legitimate place in the system of philosophy by virtue of its lawlikeness, Hegel begins from reason's entanglement with art. He claims that aesthetic items are philosophically important not by virtue of an analogy with reason but rather because they express the development of reason itself. Here I argue that the metaphysical realist's view draws our attention to Hegel's insightful critique of the theoretical assumptions that remain despite Kant's critical intentions, a dimension of Hegel's philosophy overlooked by the Kantian's view. However, I then suggest that the metaphysical realist's view fails to note the *practical* importance of Kant's separation of knowledge and aesthetics. While Hegel identifies the importance of Kant's attempt to release the aesthetic sphere from the traditional understanding of reason, his theoretical response ultimately extends the longstanding effort to seal philosophy's hegemony over the aesthetic. I conclude by proposing an alternative approach to tragedy that builds from Hegel's critique of Kant and yet maintains the autonomy of the aesthetic. Tragedy, I propose, represents an *action*; a set of events that experienced as internally unified and yet cannot be reduced to theory. This is to say that tragedy confronts us with an aesthetic sphere of making and doing that, while constrained, is incessantly open and free.

Aesthetics and tragedy

Kant's critical philosophy delimits cognitive access to transcendental ideas, opening the possibility of a philosophical programme unencumbered by external constraints. According to Williams (2012, 115), Hegel saw that critical philosophy, despite Kant's restrictions, 're-opens a tragic theme'. By restricting cognition to finitude, Kant implies that 'God, freedom, and truth are unknowable'. While this critical move goes a long way toward building a purely immanent philosophy, Kant can only decry the ideas of reason as unknowable by maintaining a 'spurious' conception of the infinite (Williams 2012, 168), an infinite that stands on philosophy's farther shore in constant reminder of our cognitive frailty. For Hegel, this dualistic vision of the world fails to break from pre-critical philosophy in which reason stands forever separated from struggle and conflict. The task of a properly *critical* philosophy is thus to show that the limits Kant places on cognition do not explode the traditional dualism but rather collapse it, exposing the infinite to the struggle of the finite. Hegel saw that, despite Kant's intentions,

critical philosophy opens ‘the possibility of a tragic philosophy’ (Williams 2012, 115), identifying the ‘true infinite’ as the one realm of being that there is (Williams 2012, 187).

The metaphysical realist’s view presented by Williams entails that Hegel’s theory of tragedy moves us beyond the separation Kant maintained between reason and experience. To understand the significance of this move, it is vital to locate Hegel’s theory of tragedy in the context of the aesthetic tradition that developed in eighteenth century philosophy. For the reader who isolates Hegel’s theory of tragedy from this tradition, as many of the Kantians do, it comes as a surprise—even a *scandal*—that Hegel examines tragedy in terms of a teleological process. When viewed as a part of this tradition, however, we find that the teleological examination of tragedy was a common feature of a broader return to Aristotelian entelechy—one of which Kant too was a part.

Baumgarten first called for a systematic study of the means by which we acquire and express sensory knowledge.³ He termed this science ‘aesthetics’, defining its parameters in the opening paragraph of the *Aesthetica* (1750) as ‘the theory of the liberal arts, the lesser theory of knowledge, the art of thinking beautifully, the art of reason by analogy’ (Baumgarten 1750, §1). The central focus of aesthetics is the nature and limits of the rationality expressed in sensory experience. Just as logic is concerned with the operations of reason and the understanding, Baumgarten claims that a new discipline ought to be a legitimate part of philosophical inquiry concerned with what we apprehend through the senses. Yet his notion of ‘reason by analogy’ entails that aesthetics remains subordinate to the higher cognitive faculty, the understanding. Theoretical matters such as logic and ethics remain distinct from sensation, meaning that empirical observation is left with no resources to defy the attacks of scepticism (see Nuzzo 2006, 577).

While it became increasingly common for philosophers such as Baumgarten to reflect on the cognitive significance of aesthetics during the mid-eighteenth century, practitioners in the arts and natural sciences searched for a new theory of creativity from within the practice of aesthetic reflection and expression. Edward Young advanced a model of creativity in his lengthy poem *Night Thoughts* in which moral reflections begin in sensuous experience.⁴ Young’s poem elevates the genius as a second Creator, a Promethean figure who imitates neither the ancients nor his contemporaries but rather presents his own experience of nature in such a way that opens the reader to the realm of ideas. The genius creates intuitively and cannot explain her work through reference to antecedents, meaning that her art is not mechanical but organic: ‘An Original may said to be of a vegetable nature; it rises

spontaneously from the vital root of Genius; it grows, it is not made' (Young 1759, 12). The causality of original art is not technical, wherein an external agent technician acts upon his object in the paradigm of efficient causation. As Aristotle (1984, 1140a2–5) explains in *Nicomachean Ethics*, *techné* is the 'reasoned state of capacity to make [*poiesis*]' . It is productive, expressing the kind of knowledge possessed by the craftsman who applies a set of principles appropriate to achieving a pre-established end. *Phronesis*, on the other hand, is the 'reasoned state of capacity to act [*praxis*]' (Aristotle 1984, 1142a25). It is characteristic of a person who knows how to live well (*eu zen*) in contexts that do not adhere to principles that can be known in advance. The teleological dimension of *phronesis* entails that it does not produce something in the paradigm of efficient causation, where events have necessary and sufficient causes. Neither does it produce in the manner of *poiesis*, whereby pre-established form is pressed upon formless matter. Rather, it produces according a final cause, which is manifest in the action of a purposive subject. Because genius is the work of nature in the subject, it requires a concept of nature that does not take the form of an already established region of causality. Rather, nature pours *new* thought into the poet. Nature does not simply follow rules but also creates rules.

Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* had a significant impact on British thinkers, most notably on Edmund Burke. Moreover, it was published in two separate German translations in 1760, and inspired Schelling, Schiller, Herder, and the *Sturm und Drang* movement. Significantly, Young modelled his account of genius on Shakespeare, bringing Shakespeare's work to the attention of German philosophy. Herder's essay 'Shakespeare' builds on Young's poetry and critical work, focusing on the difference between Shakespearean and Greek tragedy in order to highlight the historical particularity of genius. His notion of genius provides an important contribution to Young's, for it introduces a culturally bound element to poetic creation. While poetic genius is universal, for it is true to the atemporality of nature, the manner in which it expresses itself must be understood in terms of the history and context in which it emerges. Genre is not timeless form, for it is created by a transgressive work that brings new form into being. Greek and Shakespearean tragedy are thus two distinct genres; they were created under vastly different conditions and are guided by and establish different rules.

The significance of Young's account of artistic genius for Herder is that it provides a model of aesthetic creativity that identifies the appearance of the theoretical sphere *within* aesthetic experience. Drawing from Aristotle's teleological account of tragedy's initial development, Herder considers the

creativity expressed by the tragic poets as a way of understanding this harmonisation.⁵ He states that Aeschylus ‘enlarged’ and ‘recast’ the ‘impromptu dithyramb, the mimed dance, the chorus’, putting two actors on stage instead of one, thereby ‘inventing’ the concept of the protagonist and ‘reducing’ the role of the chorus (Herder 2006, 292). Following Aeschylus, Sophocles added a third actor and introduced scene painting. The concept of the protagonist was ‘invented’ by Aeschylus through his creative reproduction of inherited content in new form. Such invention is transgressive precisely because there is established form from which to break. Yet it also rule giving, for it establishes new form. Aeschylus and Sophocles contribute to the creation of the tragic genre through a series of ruptures that were freely made, and yet each rupture expresses a new rule that governs artistic practice. This is why Greek and Shakespearean tragedy constitute two different expressions of artistic genius and cannot be judged according to a universal set of rules, or used to derive those rules: both *establish* the rule by which they are to be judged. Herder’s work moves beyond Baumgarten to the extent that it highlights the ability of analogical thinking to grasp a teleological kind of necessity that is expressed within nature. Herder (2006, 312) claims that without a feeling of the unity of sense and reason, reason is but ‘an idle spectator’, and without reason, ‘taste will never reach maturity’.

In *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790)⁶ Kant builds on the concern for transgressive, law-giving creativity that characterized eighteenth century aesthetics. He draws particularly from Herder’s notion of analogy to respond to the problematic separation of the theoretical and practical spheres outlined in his earlier critical work. For Kant, Herder’s defence of analogical thinking provides a way of harmonising—though not reconciling—reason and sense in the notion of taste. Our capacity to discern the emergence of teleological laws in nature expresses a transcendental presumption that the empirical manifold of nature possess a rational order, giving rise to the seemingly oxymoronic notion of a ‘natural end’ (*Naturzweck*). While Kant rejects Herder’s claim that this harmony can restore content to metaphysics, he claims that taste regulates the function of the sense organs and drives, allowing reason to enter the practical sphere as a *guide* for cognition. The analogy between practical, lawful action and aesthetic creativity calls for a critical response; it requires the limitation of our judgment from its regular determinative operation to a reflective form.

Kant identifies two paradigmatic aesthetic items that cannot be understood in terms of external, efficient causes but require a reflective kind of judgment that searches for the expression of ends within nature: artworks and organisms. The causality of such items cannot be judged through ‘an *analogue of*

art' (CJ 5:374), where an external force acts in the paradigm of *techne*. Rather it is judged through 'an *analogue of life*', where an item is thought to act according to its own inner principle. Kant states that organic items are experienced as a natural end, an organized system that

produces the other parts (consequently each produces the others reciprocally), which cannot be the case in any instrument of art, but only of nature, which provides all the matter for instruments (even those in art): only then and on that account can such a product, as an *organized* and *self-organizing* being, be called a *natural end*. (CJ 5:374)

Kant refuses to identify natural ends with ideas, for his heuristic conception of teleological judgment remains an analogical practice of reasoning. If natural ends are self-organizing, they are free, beyond the limits of theoretical knowledge. Kant (CJ 5:435) employs this move again in the distinction he identifies between two kinds of end in the Methodology of the Teleological Power of Judgment, the final end (*der Endzweck*) and the ultimate end (*der letzte Zweck*). The final end remains outside nature in the sphere of freedom. The ultimate end, on the other hand, is manifest *within* nature: 'In order ... to discover where in the human being we are at least to posit that ultimate end of nature, we must seek out that which nature is capable of doing in order to prepare him for what he must himself do in order to be a final end' (CJ 5:431). This preparation remains a judgment of reflection, and the purposiveness of nature is ascribed 'only in relation to reflection on [its] outer intuition' and not according to an inner principle (CJ 5:375). The claim of reflective judgment is that the outer surface of nature is merely *analogous* to rational freedom: it allows us to judge that nature is potentially hospitable to the moral project, though not actually or spontaneously moral. Freedom is not a result but rather a practical calling that lies ever before us.

Kant's notion of analogy allows him to identify lawlikeness in nature. The notions of 'analogy' and 'lawlikeness' are dependent on an exemplar or a standard, which for Hegel is precisely the spurious infinite that conveniently remains beyond the limits of experience. In Hegel's view, Kant went a long way toward demonstrating how ideas might be expressed through sensuous presentation. Yet Hegel rejects Kant's distinction between two kinds of ends and instead examines Kant's ultimate end in the shape of Aristotle's *nexus finalis*, a cause that emerges in experience. Thus he collapses Kant's analogical notion of 'inner purposiveness' into 'inner *necessity*' to show that we do not 'judge' an

object to be purposive by comparing it to the operation of reason *in us* (teleological judgment) but that the Idea itself makes a sensuous appearance in the parts of an object (theoretical knowledge). The appearance of the Idea is nothing like cognitive awareness, that is, representation (*Vorstellung*). Rather, it is the intuitive and immediate presentation (*Darstellung*). Thus Hegel gives no account of aesthetic judgment, for *Darstellung* connotes a ‘pure’ appearance wherein nothing is represented, that is, wherein nothing remains ‘beyond’ what is presented. As the living being exhibits a perfect confluence of matter and form, so does the work of art manifest its Idea in its sensuous content.⁷

Hegel’s theory of tragedy

In Hegel’s aesthetics, tragedy features as a paradigmatic moment in the immanent development of rational consciousness. It is paradigmatic of reason’s development to the extent that it rehearses the instability of the Kantian dualism, which holds the spurious infinite forever separated from experience. Moreover, it embodies a vital stage in the development of the spurious infinite into the true infinite, a conception of infinitude that is generated from within the finite. In the metaphysical realists’ view, Hegel overcomes Kant’s problematic division between content and metaphysics by accounting for the development of the concept through the experience of a community. In this sense Hegel’s theory of tragedy proposes to solve the problem of the relation between reason and experience (1) by turning to the existence of ethical conflicts (2); Hegel’s examination of ethical conflict opens a new account of reason. The reality of ethical conflict shows that philosophy does not remain unaffected by suffering but that suffering is the condition of the possibility of philosophy.

To argue that Hegel’s philosophy is tragic—that tragedy and dialectic coincide—the metaphysical realist’s view emphasizes the significance of Aristotle’s *Poetics* to Hegel’s critique of Kant. In *Poetics*, Aristotle (1984, 1449b24) defines tragedy as ‘the representation [*mimesis*] of an action [*praxeos*] that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself [*teleias*]’. The represented action is ‘complete’ to the extent that it constitutes a unified, internal development that occurs entirely within the hero’s experience.⁸ In other words, the action embodies its own idea. Hegel identifies the task of interpreting tragedy as one of accounting for what Aristotle calls the ‘proper pleasure’ experienced by the spectators.⁹ The proper pleasure characteristic of the best tragedies does not pander to the transient whims of the public, as do the tragedies of lesser value, but satisfies through a process of learning. Aristotle famously accounted of this process in terms of three moments: reversal, recognition, and

catharsis. The reversal consists in a dramatic change of events. The recognition lies in the hero (and, in the ‘best’ tragedies, in the spectators who imaginatively identify with the hero’s plight), who grasps the necessity of her suffering. Despite the fact that she acted freely, the hero discovers that things could not have been otherwise; the reversal of fortune was caused by some fallibility (*harmartia*) that lay within her from the very beginning of the drama. In this sense the hero—and thus the audience in the best tragedies—come to see that her action was both free *and* necessary. The third element is catharsis, which is unique to the spectators. As Aristotle (1984, 1453a30) explains, through participating in the hero’s downfall the spectators are led ‘to the end of pity and fear by the *katharsis* of such emotions’. While the meaning of Aristotle’s usage of *katharsis* is unclear, Hegel interprets Aristotle as saying that tragedy satisfies us not through informing us that life is difficult and full of struggle, as if we had somehow forgotten, but rather through presenting the action in such a way that reconciles us to the struggle and pain that permeates our lives, thereby calming our spirits that were shattered by yet another representation of loss and grief. The importance of Aristotle’s theory of tragedy for Hegel is that it does not locate the suffering of the hero in an unfortunate sequence of events outside her control, as an efficient cause acts upon inert matter. Rather, Aristotle’s notion of tragic suffering is the result of the hero’s own inner state, a final cause that is expressed through her action. The spectators are reconciled to the suffering of the hero because they discover that her suffering was not the arbitrary result of blind fate but the result of a *telos*.¹⁰

According to Hegel, the *telos* of tragic action does not simply lie in the hero, but in the order of ethical commitments of which the hero is a part. Hegel terms this order of ethical commitments ‘ethical life’ (*Sittlichkeit*), which stands in contrast to Kantian morality (*Moralität*). He states that the heroes ‘firmly identify’ themselves with ‘one ethical “pathos” which alone corresponds to their own already established nature’, meaning that ‘they necessarily come into conflict with the opposite but equally justified ethical power’ (LA 1226). As Christoph Menke (1999, 24) explains, ‘the hero is battered to pieces by the other ... he has produced by himself’, drawing the inner contradictions of ethical life into a climactic entanglement. Clearly Hegel has Sophocles’ *Antigone* in mind. In *Antigone*, the tragic collision arises as Creon and Antigone both act according to their social roles and commitments: Antigone has the absolute duty to perform the burial procedure for her brother, and Creon to protect the city from traitors. While they are individual, free agents, their behaviour also express the determining social conditions of ancient Greek society. In particular, both Antigone and Creon are bound to their

ethical commitments on what the Greeks considered a 'natural' basis, allowing Hegel to explain the splitting of ethical substance as a confluence of necessity (as a natural endowment) and contingency (as dependent upon a will). He states that 'Nature, not the accident of circumstances or choice, assigns one sex to one law, the other to the other law; or conversely, the two ethical powers themselves give themselves an individual existence and actualise themselves in the two sexes' (PS 280). The female side of the collision represents family, life, and death; the particular elements of life that are prior to the social participation that the *polis* entails (Peters 2009, 89). Thus construed, the ethical action of women represents the citizens' existential features encompassed in their particularity. On the other hand, the male citizen represents the political and public sphere of ethical life. This involves the laws created by humans, or the universal elements of life that male citizens enter by participating in the life of the *polis*.

When understood in terms of ethical life, the heroes do not 'choose' a course of action as autonomous individuals, or to put it in the language of Kantian morality, practical reason does not legislate their material impulses. Indeed, an antinomy between two Kantian moral agents is unthinkable. On the contrary, Hegel's theory of agency rejects the 'inner-outer' distinction where an inner state causes an outer bodily reaction in the technical framework of intention and effect (Pippin 2008, 396). The heroes act according to an immediate ethical commitment, meaning that each has justification, and yet each is one-sided:

The original essence of tragedy consists ... in the fact that within such a conflict each of the opposed sides, if taken by itself, has justification; while each can establish the true and positive content of its own aim and character only by denying and infringing the equally justified power of the other. The consequence is that in its ethical life, and because of it, each is nevertheless involved in *guilt* [*Schuld*]. (LA 1196)

Hegel states that it is *in* and *because of* their ethical life (*in ihrer Sittlichkeit und durch dieselbe*) that the heroes become guilty. This is to say that tragic guilt does not come from doing what is wrong but from doing what is right. Moreover, it comes from doing what is right and thereby infringing on an opposed right. While Kantian morality stresses the inner will and intention of the agent, meaning that the agent is guilty to the extent that they violate a moral law that could never become entangled with the forces of nature, the tragic agent is deemed guilty regardless of her knowledge or intentions. There

is no struggle in Kant's moral sphere other than the tension between practical reason and one's inclinations. The tragic sphere, on the other hand, is one in which the deep ethical commitments of a society can lead its citizens to be both right and wrong at the same moment.

Building on Aristotle's conception of tragedy, Hegel argues that the collision of ethical powers is fated from the outset. This fate is not external to the form of life, acting upon it in the framework of efficient causation. It is internal, expressing an inner purpose. In Hegel's terms, what appears as 'blind fate' or 'dreadful fate' for the hero is, once seen from the vantage of the reversal, a 'rational fate' that unfolds according to a proper principle.¹¹ Thus Spirit—the collective consciousness of the whole—does not develop arbitrarily or in the paradigm of 'might is right'.¹² Rather, Spirit is 'consciousness that *has Reason*' (PS 265). The modern society that emerges against the background of ancient Greece is not simply a shape of Spirit in which reason comes to be used instrumentally, as in Kant's moral subject. It is a shape in which ethical life—the immediate commitments to which each subject is bound—is shaped and determined by a rational process expressed in experience. Hegel claims that when we grasp this rationality we are reconciled to the painful events that were necessary parts of a broader process of development. We recognise that we have witnessed 'eternal justice which, as the absolute power of fate, saves and maintains the harmony of the substance of the ethical order against the particular powers which were becoming independent and therefore colliding, and because of the inner rationality of its sway we are satisfied when we see individuals coming to ruin' (LA 1230). Reconciliation marks the end of tragic art, for the spectators no longer have an immediate relation to ethical life. They instead gain a reflective, mediated relation to their mores. What was disharmonious is brought into harmony through the 'inner rationality' exhibited by the tragic effect. This harmony is not reflective but immediate; it takes the form of the sensuous presentation of the Idea. Hegel claims to lay bare what is satisfying about the tragic effect by understanding it in terms of the satisfaction of reason.

Interpreting Hegel

Hegel's aesthetics allows two distinct experiences of tragedy: the original experience of tragedy for the ancient Greeks, whereby the shape of Spirit that is bound to an immediate attachment to ethical life is superseded by self-consciousness, and the modern experience, whereby the Kantian dualism between reason and experience is superseded by speculative philosophy. The metaphysical realist's position shows that these two experiences share the same dialectical shape; in both cases an unreflective

dualism is unknowingly brought into collision through a form of presentation that is experienced as a process. Hegel's philosophy, the culmination of the critical project, is thus a tragic philosophy; it bears tragedy within itself.

The Kantian's view rejects this conclusion, and claims that Hegel's theory of tragedy is in fact *anti*-tragic. By removing the contingency Kant granted to the aesthetic sphere, Hegel's theory of tragedy, as 'eternal justice', not only denies Kant critical philosophy but also tragedy itself. In his famous essay 'Hegel's Theory of Tragedy', A. C. Bradley (1962, 379) argues that 'even if we felt that the catastrophe was by a rational necessity involved in the divine and accomplished purpose of the world', we should be morally 'outraged' by it. Hegel's notion of reconciliation displays a naive 'enthusiasm for the affirmative', rushing over the tragic conflict in order to find a transcendent meaning that could render tragic suffering meaningful (Bradley 1962, 375).¹³ Bradley's claim is that Hegel oversteps the limits of critical philosophy by positing a totalising metaphysics that claims to reveal a trajectory beneath ethical life that cannot do other than move toward greater unity. The agents of history are, like Antigone, unfortunate casualties in the development of Spirit toward greater synthesis. Thus the 'wounds of the *Spirit* heal' (PS 407), while the untold victims of history join Antigone in her cave of sorrows outside the boundaries of the city.

Building on Bradley's critique, Sebastian Gardner (2002, 243) argues that Hegel can only maintain the connection between tragedy and ethical development 'by stepping outside the experience of tragic art so as to view the perspective of tragedy as merely partial'. By theorising the 'finality' of tragedy as reconciliation—as something that lies *beyond* tragic presentation—Hegel denies the singularity of tragic suffering. Gardner (2002, 243) argues that this is 'to break faith with the experience of tragedy, to fail to give it its due'. Like Bradley, Gardner views tragic suffering as dysteleological; a monstrous, singular moment of pain that confronts the search for a *telos* or necessity that would render it meaningful. For Kant, the monstrous is a magnitude of experience that surpasses the sublime, for its greatness 'annihilates the end [*Zweck*] which its concept constitutes' (CJ 5:253). Thus it destroys any return to teleological sensibility. The Kantian's view claims that Kant's critical limitation of aesthetic experience to an analogy of cognition retains the space in which tragedy can occur; it refuses any final verdict on suffering by holding our moral intuition in tension with our experience of nature as a sphere that is hostile to moral sensibility. Thus it provides an alternative catharsis to Hegel in which practical reason and nature are harmonized in tragic *feeling*—we are alerted through our emotions of the

viability of the moral project in nature *despite* suffering—but not reconciled for cognition. The Kantian's view concludes that by dismissing Kant's critical examination of aesthetic experience, Hegel returns to a dogmatic account of metaphysics that closes off the contingency of action and justifies the necessity of suffering as the development of reason. Suffering becomes mere appearance and the development of Spirit the deeper reality. The traditional dualism Kant originally called into question is thus returned to via an aesthetic route.

Proponents of the metaphysical realist's view aim to show that the portrayal of Hegel's theory of tragedy as a return to pre-critical metaphysics is a mere caricature of his system. Hegel does not depart from Kant's critical project, they claim, but rather corrects it. Williams (2012, 174) argues that Hegel's notion of reconciliation is only a return to dogmatic metaphysics if we read him through 'the Kantian frame'. By remaining committed to Kant's critique of metaphysics, Bradley and Gardner fail to see that Hegel aims to move philosophy not beyond the critical project as such but simply beyond Kant's problematic conception of the infinite. For instance, Bradley can only argue that Hegel oversteps critical philosophy by remaining committed to the Kantian dualism, leaving the 'prejudices of ordinary modes of cognition totally uncontested' (Williams 2012, 168). Bradley's critique relies on an unacknowledged system of morality that is autonomous from ethical life, thus reproducing Kant's moral dualism. He disregards Hegel's immanent account of reason as an inner purpose emerging within experience to accuse Hegel of transposing an infinite notion of rationality onto the dynamics of history. Such a view is grounded on the presumption that tragedy is the presentation of irresolvable contradiction, an *affirmation* of the Kantian dualism. Williams concludes that if Hegel's philosophy departs from Kant, it cannot be a return to a pre-critical understanding of reason as impassable, theoretical power. Instead, it puts forward an immanent view of reason manifest within the alteration of history. Williams' claim is that Hegel advances Kant's revolution against (traditional) metaphysics. Kant denies that we can have the kinds of knowledge to which pre-critical metaphysics aspires, and Hegel agrees. Kant advances a conception of freedom in terms of self-determination, and Hegel agrees. It is Hegel's commitment to the critical project that leads him to alter the Kantian frame for the sake of advancing the critique of spurious metaphysics.

Houlgate concurs with Williams, arguing that it is Hegel's attempt to advance Kant's critique of metaphysics that leads to a new ontology. This new ontology provides an 'alternative to Kant's "Metaphysical Deduction" in the *Critique of Pure Reason*', restoring content to metaphysical claims in

the face of Kant's critique (Houlgate 2006, 115). In the metaphysical deduction, Kant differentiates the concepts of the understanding from the logical forms of judgment, arguing that these concepts are 'pure' (i.e. without content), separate from the content that is judged. For Hegel, Kant's deduction holds the concepts of the understanding on the opposite side of an impassable chasm, thus preserving the metaphysical dualism between concept and object despite his regulative notion of aesthetic judgment. The upshot of Houlgate's (2006, 116) argument is that Hegel can only advance the critique of metaphysics by establishing that 'concept', 'judgment', and 'syllogism' do not simply name logical structures, as they do for Kant, but 'structures in nature, and so in *being itself*, not just forms of human understanding and reason'. It is only by restoring content to the concepts, which pre-empted and established in the notion of art as the sensuous appearance of the Idea, that the critical project can overcome traditional metaphysics.

The puzzle of tragedy

According to the metaphysical realist's view, Hegel correctly presents Kant's separation of abstract morality and material life as a tragic dualism. Hegel's speculative account of history is thus framed as the rational conclusion of the tragic process. While Kant argued that we are entitled to judge the aesthetic sphere of art and history through an analogy with reason, Hegel shows us that we are entitled to consider both history and art as an ontological stage that transposes Kant's theoretical court of reason to the practical court of world judgment:

World history is this divine tragedy, where spirit rises up above pity, ethical life, and everything that in other spheres is sacred to it. ... But what has been laid low, *has* been laid low and *had* to be laid low. World spirit is unsparing and pitiless. ... Nothing profounder can be said than Schiller's words, 'World history is a court of world judgment'. No people ever suffered wrong; what it suffered, it had merited. The court of world judgement is not to be viewed as the mere might of spirit ... World history, on the other hand, is always on the advance to something higher. (Hegel 1995, 306-307)

Because art is not free but expressive of the ethical mores of a community, Hegel infers that tragedy is a form of art akin to the *telos* of history. It displaces the fixity of moral absolutes that furnish the

Kantian court of reason and frames spiritual life in such a way that reconciles what has been ‘laid low’ into criteria that can be used for judgment.

Hegel’s theory of tragedy sets a challenging puzzle. If we criticize the development of history based on moral convictions, then, as the metaphysical realist’s view demonstrates, we reproduce the tragedy of traditional philosophy by presuming a conception of reason as an impassable power that stands ever separate from history. We position ourselves *above* history, armed with the infinite power to pass judgment over a sphere from which we can at least partially disentangle ourselves. In this position we join Oedipus before his downfall, full of the seer’s wit and yet oblivious to the fact that we too are *anthropos*, the finite being who is four, two, and finally three footed.¹⁴ Yet as Robert Bernasconi argues, to reject this position and, with the metaphysical realists, claim the identity between philosophy and history seems to produce a new kind of tragedy, one in which *philosophy* transgresses its limits. Bernasconi draws our attention to Hegel’s reflection of the implications of the passage cited above. Here Hegel (1995, 307-308) asserts that it is ‘the right of world spirit’ to trample the peoples who do not bear the work of Spirit under foot, for ‘the absolute idea of spirit has absolute right against anything else’. For Bernasconi (2011, 318), to claim that ‘no people ever suffered wrong’ and that suffering is ‘deserved’ expresses a philosophical kind of tragedy, for it reveals Hegel’s commitment to a moral view of the world where the good (in the form of the rational) is rewarded and the bad (in the form of the irrational) is punished. Thus Hegel (1995, 308) can say that ‘as grievous as it may be to watch [Spirit] trample [the rights of non-Spirit bearing peoples] under foot’, we can be reconciled to this fate because it is ‘rational’. Bernasconi concludes that Hegel’s theory is ‘anti-tragic’, for it steps out of the tragic cry of injustice to suggest that *all* suffering comes from a rational error. It claims that Spirit, the shape of consciousness that has reason, can redeem the incalculable volume of human suffering in history.

For Williams, Bernasconi’s critique fails to consider Hegel’s theory of tragedy on its own terms. It only has force ‘if one presupposes the moral vision of the world’ (Williams 2012, 364), that is, if one is already committed to the tragic dualism between abstract morality and material life. What Williams wants to show is that Bernasconi fails to note that the tragedies do not present suffering that is irrational. Rather, they present situations that could have been otherwise had the hero recognized her fallibility, yielded, and acknowledged the legitimacy of the opposed ethical power. Here Williams makes an important point, correcting the tendency of the Kantian’s reading of Hegel to overlook the

Aristotelian element of tragedy whereby the heroes come to discover, through suffering, an error that lay within their self-understanding. Through drawing our attention to the fact that Hegel's theory of tragedy powerfully illuminates many of the tragedies that present suffering as the result of human error, as well as many events in history that can be understood through the reversal/recognition dynamic, Williams (2012, 364) aims to defend Hegel by appealing to 'Hegel's tragic view of world history that is plainly evident in the text'. The rise of Spirit to a higher stage is not only an advance, he claims, but is also tragic: 'an unhappy bliss in misfortune [*eine unglückselige Seligkeit im Unglück*]' (LA 1232). Thus Hegel's reading of history does not endorse the cynical view that whatever prevails is right. Hegel is only committed to the view that the 'judgment of history is rational *to the extent that* it preserves and upholds right' (Williams 2012, 366, my emphasis).

While Williams is correct to note that many of the tragedies present suffering that is rational to the extent that the hero's fall is internal to their own being, he fails to note that Bernasconi's attack is not simply on Hegel's theory of tragedy but also on the theory in which he attempts to enclose history. Bernasconi questions whether one can move from the theoretical reconstruction of an artwork to the organic sphere of history to establish that suffering is deserved. For Bernasconi, the claim that *some* events in history express similar patterns of reversal and recognition to that we find in the tragedies might have some validity, but to claim that *all* suffering is deserved is to claim that his theory of tragedy—and thus his dialectical philosophy—is adequate to history as such. Indeed, Hegel *must* claim that his theory as adequate to history, for it is only by such a theory that 'the necessity of what happens to the individuals appear as absolute rationality, and only then can our hearts be morally at peace: shattered by the fate of the heroes but reconciled fundamentally' (LA 1215). By grasping the absolute rationality of world history, Hegel argues that philosophy can turn everything from the fall of Greece to the failure of the French Revolution into aesthetic phenomena that constitute moments in the development of Spirit toward greater self-awareness. The task of philosophy is to confront the terrors of history in such a way as to reconcile us to the suffering we find, thereby restoring our hearts to moral peace.

Bernasconi's critique of Hegel raises the following problem for the metaphysical realist's view. If some suffering proves to be irrational—if some historical events resist his theory and frustrate our desire for moral peace—then Hegel's system cannot be adequate to its Idea. For Williams, examples of dysteleological suffering are not a problem for Hegel, for his 'metaphor of the slaughterhouse

expresses the irrationality of radical evil'.¹⁵ Hegel's argument is that in the irrational slaughterhouse of history, Spirit emerges as consciousness that has reason, that is, as consciousness that can call slaughter to account. Yet if Hegel's theory of tragedy were to admit the irrationality of *some* suffering, then our hearts would only be restored to 'moral peace' if we were to calculate that every particular case of suffering is worth the broader rational benefits. This moral peace would not be the seamless, immediate reconciliation to the whole but rather a judgment of the superiority of one kind of value over another. Voices that cannot be brought into harmony with the melody of history but stand in tragic silence, presenting us with a moment of pain and suffering in such excess that it cannot be redeemed by some other emergent value, suggest that Hegel's idea of history as divine tragedy is not adequate to its object. Instead, it would describe *some* events wherein historical development mirrored the logic of tragic art. And if Hegel's theory cannot exhaust all cases then it cannot stand the resistance that alternate conceptions of historical development might pose to his narrative.

The representation of an action

Hegel's assumption that philosophy can uncover and present the inner shape of historical genres rejects the Kantian doctrine of the autonomy of the aesthetic. Instead, Hegel advances a teleological model in which aesthetic items present ideas that advance as a dichromatic continuum. Kant insists that for an item to be experienced aesthetically, it must feature as pure individuality and cannot be subsumed into a greater whole. Yet as the metaphysical realist's view points out, Kant's insistence on the recalcitrance of aesthetic items seems to depend on the problematic separation of reason from sensuous life. The dualism at the core of Kant's project allows him to hold the validity of aesthetic judgment in suspension; it frees the aesthetic sphere from the hegemony of reason precisely by retaining a spurious conception of infinitude.

Yet must it be a dualism that motivates Kant's doctrine of the autonomy of the aesthetic, that grounds the self-limitation of aesthetic reflection? Might it not be aesthetic items of experience themselves—including artworks, organic beings, human agents—that confront us with examples of creative freedom so powerful that our subsumptive efforts crumble before particularity irreducible to our theory construction? Might not such items set us on a path of discovery on which we are alerted to an aesthetic sphere that is genuinely open, not by virtue of being non-rational, but by virtue of manifesting the power to self-constrain against the efficient causality of the sphere of nature constituted

by cognition? In this sense the autonomy of the aesthetic would not simply be an *a priori* assumption we take *to* experience. It would be a way of thinking that is hard-won *through* experience. The ‘autonomy’ of the aesthetic would not take the form of unfettered chaos or rational rule following, but of transgressive creativity *and* rule following, that is, it would take the form of action. In this final section I propose an alternative to Hegel’s teleological reading of tragedy that maintains Hegel’s critique of Kant’s spurious infinite and yet builds from Kant’s account of aesthetic autonomy. I propose that tragedy is not a transitional process, the finality of which lies on tragedy’s farther shore, but rather a historical opening between two reductive conceptions of reason’s relation to experience.

By removing Kant’s conception of judgment in the attempt to cast aesthetic experience in terms of the Idea, Hegel’s theory of tragedy begins from the transgressive creativity of aesthetic items characteristic of Kant’s aesthetics only to remove their confrontational nature. Aesthetic items for Hegel certainly confront and destabilize the cognitive efforts of their original audience, yet their teleological shape works immediately and spontaneously toward reconciliation. As Jacques Taminiaux (1995, 164) argues, tragedy for Hegel is not coincident with but rather ‘controlled’ by the dialectic. Opposed to the Kantian aesthetic item, which features as aesthetic precisely by virtue of its resistance to theoretical cognition, Hegelian tragedy is a ‘document of a metaphysical *theoria*, of an insight so deep into the heart of reality ... that the *polis* is excluded entry’. Taminiaux identifies a weakness in Hegel’s theory of tragedy precisely in its theoretical character; by collapsing Kant’s practical/theoretical division, Hegel aims to capture the practical dimension of aesthetic items in terms of theory. Christoph Menke (1996, 53) explains Hegel’s theory of tragedy as a ‘reconstruction’ of the internal collapse ‘of beautiful *Sittlichkeit* out of an interest for the theory of modernity’. While Hegel’s theory begins with the power of aesthetic items to interrupt established patterns of thought and confront us with our failed attempts to control and legislate collective life, it frames this power as ‘the medium of its supersession, that is, the beginning of modernity’ (Menke 1996, 53). In the Hegelian ‘theatre’—what Taminiaux (1995, 164) describes as the sphere of ‘seeing’ as constituted by one’s basic philosophical assumptions—there is ‘no place for *praxis*, nor for the threat of *hubris*, nor for *phronesis*’. In other words, there is no place for *action*; it is rather a theoretical sphere.

Hegel’s reduction of the practical to the theoretical is evident in his reading of the Kantian symbol. Kant argued that symbolic presentation makes possible a concept ‘which only reason can think, and to which no sensible intuition can be adequate’ (CJ 5:351). For proponents of the metaphysical realist’s

view, the Kantian symbol features as a means to patch up the fracturing dualistic system, a solution that is ultimately incapable of reconciling the divide between theoretical and practical philosophy. Yet for Kant, the non-cognitive thinkability of symbolic presentation serves precisely to harmonize—and *not* to reconcile—the two spheres of philosophy, allowing interaction while maintaining distinctness. Kant (CJ 5:351) states that in the symbol, ‘judgment proceeds in a way merely analogous to that which it observes in schematization’. When our experience of nature as a progressive nexus of causes is ruptured by the confronting presence of a unified, purposive item—a great work of art or an organism—schematic cognition becomes impossible and we are forced to expand ‘our concept of nature, namely as a mere mechanism, into the concept of nature as art’ (CJ 5:246). Yet not even a concept of nature as art is enough to contain the deliberative action we find expressed in artworks and organisms. As we saw in Kant’s notion of the natural end, such items can only be judged through a concept of nature as ‘*life*’ (CJ 5:374). In this sense, Kant’s aesthetics frees action—both the self-propagating action of organisms and the creative productivity of genius—from theoretical reason, from theory, at yet shows how it contains a certain kind of lawfulness: the capacity of a living being to actively self-constrain by acting from a principle broader than efficient causes. Kant uses several different terms to express the lawfulness of aesthetic creativity, such as ‘lawfulness without law’, ‘purposiveness without a purpose’, and the transgressive ‘freedom’ of ‘beautiful art’. It is precisely our capacity to represent purposive action symbolically that lawfulness can be experienced and yet protected from subsumption into a greater logical system. Understood as symbol, the artwork does not express an Idea that can be grasped philosophically, but features as an ineliminable point of reflection that invites interpretation and prompts creative expansion. Hegel’s notion of the Idea by contrast heals the abyss between sign and signified, thereby closing the possibility of transgressive creativity opened by Kantian aesthetics. The symbol is posited as the anticipation of freedom, for it is deemed to contain a *telos* of semiotic identity with its sign. When such a relation is declared, the unity of the material and transcendental object anticipated by Kant is reformed into a relationship between appearance and essence. While the notion of symbol expresses an underdetermined meaning, thereby rendering the meaning-making process as an action itself, what appears in the form of pain and destruction is, for Hegel, idealized, meaning that the indifference of nature to our moral efforts is transfigured and revealed in the light of redemption.¹⁶

What I am proposing is an alternative reading of Kantian aesthetics that is much closer to Walter Benjamin's (1998) account of *Trauerspiel* than Hegel's tragedy. For Benjamin, the modern *Trauerspiel* is not a higher form of art that embodies modernity's supersession of its ancient conditions. Rather, it opens us to the original, allegorical nature of tragedy that confronts causal systems with the indeterminateness of the symbol. Benjamin is of course sensitive to the fact that the content of ancient Greek tragedy and *Trauerspiel* are radically different. Yet like tragedy, *Trauerspiel* is introduced by a 'significant work' that violates the limits of a previous mode of presentation. This violation is also an origin (*Ursprung*), a transgressive action that becomes a norm. Origin does not present an Idea that is available for thought but is rather 'an eddy in the stream of becoming', swallowing 'the material involved in the process of genesis' (Benjamin 1998, 45). That which is original is never the manifest existence of the factual, for its movement is only apparent to a dual insight. In the first insight, origin is 'a process of restoration and reestablishment'. In the second, origin is 'something imperfect and incomplete'. When seen in this double way, origin is an 'idea' that 'will constantly confront the historical world' (Benjamin 1998, 45-46).

For Benjamin, the origin of tragedy is best understood in the hero's silence. By refusing to justify her actions according to the language of her opponent or the traditional vocabulary of the chorus, the hero's silence does not reconcile us to the action but rather confronts us with the impossibility of synthesis. If the hero were to defend herself against the logic of her oppressor, she would have to employ signs that validate the oppressor's claim to power, rendering her suffering as a necessary component in the development of some inner rationality. We think of Antigone's entombment and Prometheus' eternal torment; the hero refrains from self-justification and thus throws suspicion back on her persecutors, transforming Creon into a tyrant and Zeus into a monster. This is not a moralized condemnation in which the perpetrator is deemed to have transgressed an impassable law. Neither is it the tragic guilt of the Hegelian hero, who finds herself as a victim necessitated by modernity's self-realisation. Rather, the hero's silence lies beyond the articulate. The hero is, like Prometheus, *pro-manthano*, 'knowing in advance', seeing the nullity of the established moral order and thus finding no language within it commensurate to her knowledge. This is not because her knowledge is somehow transcendent or impassable. Rather, the lack of a language capable of expressing her innocence means that her defence is ethically in advance of both the old gods of ethical life and the new gods of the political order.

Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy (1998) explain the resistance of tragic silence to theory in terms of the ‘romantic absolute’, a new conception of the absolute that harmonizes practical and theoretical reason and yet cannot be grasped by speculation. Turning to Schelling, Schiller, and Novalis for an alternative reading of Kantian aesthetics, they argue that tragedy is neither redemption nor total disfiguration but rather a form of representation that searches for integration and renders life as something that can be fought for and valued. Romanticism for Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy (1998, 49) builds on Kant’s productive notion of organic self-expression, the internal formative force (*bildende Kraft*) ‘which romanticism transcribes into the *vis poetica* by means of which “in the self all things are formed organically”’. In Taminiaux’s (1995, 116) language of seeing, while the Hegelian theatre excludes *praxis* by reducing *theoria* to the speculative practice of grasping the Idea that emerges *through* action, tragic theatre must rather ‘be linked to the ambiguous terrain of *praxis*’. When *theoria* is reconceived as the ‘seeing’ of singular events, tragedy does not restore our hearts to moral peace. Yet neither does it give our hearts over to resignation. Rather, tragedy opens a moment of clarity between two reductive ways of framing the relation between reason and appearance that would occlude the innocence of the hero by ascribing to her some form of rational or metaphysical guilt. In the Benjaminian conception of allegory, we are confronted with the twilight of the gods—the eclipse of the infinite from lived experience—yet not their full departure. This is precisely the transcendental, tragic position of discursive cognition; it opens us to the sphere of action. The historical sphere is represented not in the shape of a teleological movement toward greater freedom but as openness, a clearing between total forms of theory in which action is best understood in terms of *praxis*, *hubris*, and *phronesis*.

Benjamin, Taminiaux, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy point toward an alternative post-Kantian tradition in which tragedy cannot be understood as a presentation of the Idea that anticipates the representational activities of religion and philosophy, for tragedy *is* representational. It is an interruption to seamless reasoning, illuminating the world by representing through action what cannot be represented by language or conceptual thought. Kant intentionally retained a representational account of cognition to maintain a grammar capable of resisting the human tendency to confuse the subjective conditions of thought with truth.¹⁷ Maintaining this grammar does not require the oversimplified notion of representation as a subjective image of the real object, as is often ascribed to Kant’s philosophy. As representation, art has a synthetic dimension, yet not the absolute synthesis we find in Hegel. It is an intermediate stage between two complete forms of theory, maintaining the open-

endedness of Kantian aesthetics. The task of philosophy that recognises the representational character of art—that is alive to the reality of tragedy—is to outline a procedure for thinking that does not enclose the aesthetic sphere in theory but rather authentically engages with the recalcitrant particularity of aesthetic experience. This way of thinking does not reconcile us to the suffering of history but instead remains within the experience of tragedy by outlining a project of self-limitation and collective sense making. Such a project has no guarantee of success, no protection from future tragedy, and no capacity to redeem past moments of cultural shipwreck. Rather, it acknowledges the task of thinking and acting in a world that is ceaselessly vulnerable, and free.

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¹ In this translation I have followed Halliwell (2002, 6), who warns of 'the perils of equating mimesis with imitation'. Halliwell (2002, 7) argues that *mimesis* for the Greeks 'gave something much closer to a unified conception of "art"', or 'the representational arts as a class'. Our reductive and pejorative use of the Latinized forms of 'imitation', while not original to *imitatio*, is a result of aesthetic theories that contrast eighteenth century conceptions of fine art, representation, and genius with antiquity's supposedly primitive conception of art as copying nature. Thus Halliwell argues that the modern sense of 'representation' or *Vorstellung* is in fact much closer to the original meaning.

² Hegel 1975, 1215. Hereafter referred to in the text as LA.

³ Baumgarten (1750, §1) termed this science ‘aesthetics’, defining its parameters as ‘the theory of the liberal arts, the lesser theory of knowledge, the art of thinking beautifully, the art of reason by analogy’.

⁴ Young (1795, 12) states that ‘As the occasion of this Poem was real, not fictitious, so the method pursued in it was rather imposed by what spontaneously arose in the Author’s mind on that occasion, than meditated or designed.’

⁵ Herder’s description of the development of tragedy follows Aristotle’s account in book IV of *Poetics*. In this book Aristotle (1984, 1449a10-31) describes tragedy’s development as both an organic process and the product of human innovations.

⁶ Kant 2000. Henceforth cited in the text as CJ.

⁷ See Aristotle 1984, 412a1ff. In *De Anima*, Aristotle does not make an inner/outer contrast between form and matter. He rather states that form is causally responsible for the organization of the outer parts, meaning that it is fully expressed in the matter: ‘matter is potentiality, form actuality’.

⁸ In *Poetics* Aristotle (1984, 1452b-1453b) states that ‘the structure of the best tragedy should be not simple but complex and one that represents incidents arousing fear and pity—for that is peculiar to this form of art’. In tragedies that follow this structure, the hero’s suffering is instrumental in the process of reversal and recognition; recognition occurs *through* suffering. Yet while the hero suffers, the pity and fear are ultimately a subjective response in the *spectators* through the same ‘structure and incidents of the play’.

⁹ Aristotle’s aim in *Poetics* is to identify the ‘proper pleasure’ of tragedy so that higher tragedies can be distinguished from those that are not written to instruct but to entertain. Poets who aim to entertain, Aristotle (1984, 1453a30f) explains, ‘merely follow their public, writing as its wishes dictate. But the pleasure here is not that of tragedy’. This critique is significant for Hegel, for it provides a way to identify the ‘highest’ tragedies without appealing to a tragic essence.

¹⁰ This definition of tragedy seems to capture only a small set of tragedies, such as Sophocles’ *Antigone* and Aeschylus’ *Eumenides*. Some scholars have pointed out that Hegel notes a second kind of tragedy that encompasses a wider range of the tragedies such as *Oedipus Rex*. For Hegel, such tragedies involve a conflict between (a) the right of the protagonist to own what he *knows* he has done and (b) the course of actions that have been ordained by the gods that have been *unknowingly* carried out. Both forms of tragedy dramatize the irreconcilable collision between the monstrous forces at play on human lives and the spontaneous freedom of the human will. In this paper I focus on Hegel’s first theory of tragedy, as the second theory does not feature until his *Lectures on Aesthetics* and is not integrated into his philosophical project in the same way as the first theory. See Houlgate 2004, 182 ff.

¹¹ Hegel 1977, 278. Hereafter cited in the text as PS.

¹² In Hegel’s (1995, §164) terms, the ‘court of world judgement is not to be viewed as the mere might of spirit’.

¹³ More recently, Nussbaum (2001, 68) describes Hegel’s reading of tragedy in terms of reconciliation as the ultimate progressive fantasy of modernity, for it is grounded on the belief that ‘the very possibility of conflict or tension between different spheres of value will be altogether eliminated’.

¹⁴ When Oedipus is warned by Teiresias the blind Seer that it is he who is the guilty one, he rejects the warning, for it was his own ‘seer’s skill’ and untaught ‘wit’ that first saved Thebes. See Sophocles *Oedipus the King*, in Oates & O’Niel 1938, l. 380ff.

¹⁵ One of Williams’ key motifs in his defense of Hegel’s theory of tragedy is Hegel’s reference to history as a ‘slaughterhouse’ (Hegel 1956, §24). Williams (2012, 372) considers Hegel to be deeply aware of irrational suffering, for he held that history is only rational insofar as right is preserved. Yet as I argue presently, Williams’ argument turns on a prior commitment to a notion of right that cannot be defended by Hegel’s theory of tragedy.

¹⁶ Proponents of the metaphysical realist’s view might reject the claim that Hegel dismisses singularity in favour of the Ideal. In *Science of Logic* for example, while Hegel (1969, 675ff.) states that the singular thing and the universal are united in the Idea, he also insists that they maintain their independence from one another. In the most advanced kind of judgments, judgments of the concept, the singular thing is external to the universal, but not external to the Idea. According to Paul Redding (2007, 184), such judgments ‘can be thought of as somehow being directed to some object as having the degree of independence from the universal characteristic of the singular: qua singular, the thing is not just an exemplification of its kind’. While this defence shows that Hegel gives room for the independence of the singular, for it makes room for alternative narratives, it does not address the critique of narrating history. My claim is that we do not require an alternate narrative of history but rather an alternate conception of history that is sensitive to the irreducibility of historical events to narratives as such.

¹⁷ Kant (CJ 5:293) describes this mode of judgment as follows: ‘a faculty for judging that in its reflection takes account (*a priori*) of everyone else’s way of representing in thought, in order as it were to hold its judgment up to human reason as a whole and thereby avoid the illusion which, from subjective private conditions that could easily be held to be objective, would have a detrimental influence on the judgment’.